memory of Javon Wilson and so many others to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

KATHARINE ''KAPPY'' SCATES

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, today I want to say a few words about one of the most admired members of my staff, Katharine ''Kappy'' Scates. Kappy is retiring at the end of the year. I don't know what we will do without her. Oftentimes, public servants are in it for the accolades—not Kappy. She, in her own quiet way, just wanted to make a difference in people's lives.

Since 1996, when I first ran for the U.S. Senate, Kappy has been my eyes and ears in southern Illinois. She is a retired elementary school teacher and a friend of my predecessor and mentor Senator Paul Simon. Kappy joined our campaign as a volunteer, and we all fell in love with her. She not only knew everybody, she was happy to drive the wheels off her car to be everywhere. In 1999, Kappy came to work for us in our Marion, IL, offices. She quickly became indispensable.

When it comes to southern Illinois, Kappy is a human rolodex. From Carmi to Cairo, Kappy Scates is a household name. On my behalf, Kappy met with countless people. She listened to their ideas and concerns—and did her best to help solve problems. And whatever the task, there isn't a town in southern Illinois that Kappy can't recruit a few folks to pitch in and help. People know that when you are on Kappy's side, you are on the right side.

Let me give just one example. In Ridgway, IL, Kappy helped a dental clinic. It wasn't easy; there were hurdles every step of the way. But Kappy would not take no for an answer. She got all the equipment and convinced hygienists and a part-time dentist to help out in this severely underserved community. I got the credit, but it was Kappy's vision, hard work, and determination that made it happen.

I could go on about all those Kappy has helped, but let me tell just one story—about a housekeeper at a motel where I often stay. Years ago, at 62 years old, she told me that she had never in her life had health insurance—not for a single day. She had worked as a cook, waitress, and housekeeper, but had never known the security of having health insurance. She hadn't even seen a doctor in over 20 years. Enter Kappy Scates. Kappy spent hours meeting with her and helping her figure out a solution. Finally, because of the Affordable Care Act and Kappy's help signing her up—she was able to afford health insurance for the first time in her life. But that is not the end of the story.

You see, after my friend saw a doctor for the first time in more than two decades, she was told she was diabetic. Fortunately, Kappy had stayed in touch. She drove her to doctor appointments and helped get the critical medications she needed. It probably saved her life. That is who Kappy is—always going above and beyond the call of duty. She has a great heart and pours it into everything she does.

I want to thank Steve—Kappy's husband of more than 56 years—their children: Steve, Carole, Tim, Susie, and 18 grandchildren—for sharing so much of their wife, mother, and grandmother with the community. I also want to thank the entire Scates family, who have lived in the Shawneetown area since the early 1800s. You can't set foot in southern Illinois without running into a member of the Scates family. They are the heartbeat of one of the best parts of our State. The Scates family farm is a well-known and respected family operation. In fact, it is not only one of the largest family farms in Illinois, it is known as one of the best. Throughout the years, the Scates family support and generosity have meant more that I can express in words.

I will close with this. I believe in the role of public service to make a difference. Kappy's years of service reflect that, too. Our Nation needs more people like Kappy Scates. I couldn't be more proud of the work she has done—and the person she is. I am honored to congratulate her on a job well done, and I am lucky to count her as a friend. I wish Kappy, Steve, and her family all the best.

NOMINATION OF MERRICK GARLAND

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I have served in this Chamber for 42 years and served as chairman or ranking member of the Judiciary Committee for nearly two decades. I have seen a lot of debates, even contentious ones, and good-faith disagreements between Senators. But what Senate Republicans did this year to shut down Chief Judge Merrick Garland's nomination to the Supreme Court—well, it might be the most outrageous act of obstruction and irresponsibility that I have seen in my entire time in the Senate. It is a dangerous step toward politicizing our highest Court, in a judicial system that long has been the envy of the world.

Now that there is a Republican President about to be sworn in, I predict that all of a sudden we will hear Republicans talking about the importance of the Supreme Court having its full nine Justices. But make no mistake, these will be the same Senators who turned their backs on the Court and the American people for nearly a year by refusing to fill the vacancy since February.

Senate Republicans cared more about preserving that vacancy for a Republican president than they did about an independent Supreme Court. The result was that they blocked one of the most qualified Supreme Court nominees in this Nation's history. Chief Judge Garland is an exceptional jurist with a stellar record and impeccable credentials. He has the most Federal judicial experience of any Supreme Court nominee ever. Republicans and Democrats alike have recognized Chief Judge Garland as a brilliant and impartial judge with unwavering fidelity to the rule of law. In this day and age, he was as much of a consensus Supreme Court nominee as one could find. The senior Republican Senator from Utah and former chairman of the Judiciary Committee has previously noted that he would be confirmed easily. It is not hard to see why Chief Judge Garland has received significant bipartisan support in the past. When the American Bar Association reviewed his nomination, it unanimously awarded him its highest rating of ''Well-Qualified.'' To reach that rating, lawyers from across the country assessed his integrity, professional competence, and temperament. One said, ''Garland is the best that there is. He is the finest judge I have ever met.'' Another said ''He is a judge's judge, with a very high standard and legal craftsmanship, a fine sense of fairness to all parties, a measured and dignified judicial temperament, and the highest respect for law and reasoned argument.'' One even said that Chief Judge Garland ''may be the perfect human being.''

And yet Republicans have refused to provide him with any process whatsoever—no hearing, no vote. The result is that Chief Judge Garland is now the longest pending Supreme Court nominee in history. No Supreme Court nominee has ever been treated this way. Republicans set a new standard this year. It is the American people who have been harmed and spurned by this unprecedented blockade.

Until this year, Senate Judiciary Committee members had always taken their responsibility seriously. Ever since the Judiciary Committee started holding public confirmation hearings of Supreme Court nominees more than a century ago, the Senate has never denied a Supreme Court nominee a hearing and a vote.

Even when a majority of the committee has not supported a Supreme Court nominee, the committee has still sent the nomination to the floor so that all 100 Senators can fulfill their constitutional role of providing advice and consent on Supreme Court nominees. When I became chairman of the Judiciary Committee in 2001 during the Bush administration, I and Senator Hatch—who was then the ranking member—memorialized in a letter this longstanding tradition regarding Supreme Court nominees. The current Republican leadership has broken with this century of practice to make its own shameful history. But Senate Republicans have spent 8 years insisting on a different set of rules for President Obama.

Republicans rolled the dice this year, subjecting the Supreme Court and the American people to their purely political gamble. They will tell us they have won. But there is no victor—for their partisan game, this body, the Supreme

Court, and the American people all suffered. As we go forward under the new President-elect, I urge those Republicans to think carefully about their own words about the voice of the American people. I remind those Republicans that, in last month's election, Secretary Clinton received over 2.5 million more votes from the American people than the President-elect. That is hardly a mandate for any Supreme Court nominee who would turn back the clock on the rights of women, LGBT Americans, or minorities; or a nominee who would undermine safety net programs like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, or the Civil Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act, or the Voting Rights Act.

President Obama made the best possible choice for a Supreme Court nominee, and any other Supreme Court nominee will face a difficult comparison to Chief Judge Garland's experience, brilliance, integrity, and support from across the political spectrum. Chief Judge Garland is an honorable, decent man and a model of public service. What Senate Republicans have done to him is unfair and unwarranted, and it is an insult, not just to him, but to all Americans who expect all of us to do our jobs and uphold our oath to the Constitution.

As the Republican leadership brings the 114th Congress to a close, they do so having established another record for inaction on judicial nominations. Despite the fact that there are dozens of qualified, consensus nominees pending on the Senate floor right now, we will finish this Congress having confirmed just 22 judicial nominees in 2 years. That is the lowest number since Harry Truman was president. There are currently 30 judicial nominees awaiting a vote, all with the support of their home State Senators and bipartisan support from the Judiciary Committee. We have not had a single confirmation vote on a judicial nominee since July. Because the Republican leadership shutdown judicial confirmations, the number of judicial vacancies in our Federal courts will increase to over 100 for the first time in almost 6 years, a vacancy rate of nearly 12 percent. And of those, the number of judicial emergency vacancies will exceed 40.

This did not happen overnight. It is the result of a sustained effort that the Republican leadership chose. If we had just followed regular order, like them majority leader promised time and again, all of these nominees would have been confirmed months ago. Republicans cannot claim that President Obama has not made enough nominations to solve this crisis. They cannot say that he has not worked with them to find consensus nominees. Of the nominees awaiting a vote, 13 have the support of either one or two home State Republican Senators, and 28 were reported by voice vote.

The majority leader has repeatedly come to the floor to justify his obstruction by claiming he has treated ''President Obama fairly with respect to his judicial nominations'' in comparison to President Bush. That is not even close to accurate. Even more to the point, our constitutional duty of advice and consent is not about comparing one President to another. It is to ensure our Federal courts have the judges they need in order to provide Americans the speedy justice the Constitution promises. And right now, that is not the case when one of every nine judgeships across the country is vacant. Currently, there are 13 judicial emergency vacancies in Texas alone.

Compare the record of the Republican Senate today to that of Senate Democrats in 2008, when I was chairman of the Judiciary Committee during the last 2 years of the George W. Bush administration. Senate Democrats confirmed 68 judicial nominees, accounting for two-thirds of all of the judicial nominations President Bush made in those 2 years. In contrast, since last January when Republicans took the majority, they have confirmed just 22 judicial nominees-barely one-quarter of the nominations President Obama has made during this Congress. To reach parity with President Bush, this Senate would need to confirm an additional 31 nominees. We could make that happen right now by voting on the nominees currently pending on the Senate floor.

During the final year of the Bush administration, Senate Democrats confirmed 28 circuit and district nominees, all of whom the Judiciary Committee reported to the floor that year. This year, Republicans have allowed confirmations of just nine circuit and district nominees, each of whom the Judiciary Committee reported last year. So the majority leader has failed to even begin this year's work on nominees.

When the Senate operated under regular order, consensus nominees like the ones we have pending on the floor were confirmed before long recesses and at the end of the year. Instead, the Republicans' standard operating procedure has been to refuse votes on consensus nominees. At the end of 2009, they refused to vote on 10 judicial nominees. At the end of 2010 and again in 2011, they left 19 judicial nominees pending, almost all of whom were consensus nominees. At the end of 2012, they blocked votes on 11 judicial nominees pending. After blocking 10 nominees at the end of 2013 and then 6 in 2014, Senate Republicans once again blocked 19 nominees at the end of last year. This year, they set a new record by leaving 30 judicial nominees pending. All 30 are qualified and have bipartisan support, and there is no good reason we should not have voted on them already or before we adjourn this month.

The vacancy crisis has happened because 8 years ago, rather than adhering to regular order, Republican leadership granted the wishes of rightwing legal groups who lobbied them to engage in ''unprecedented'' obstruction of President Obama's nominees. They have proven again that pure partisanship matters more to them than ensuring our courts have the resources they need to uphold the rule of law and provide justice for all Americans. Republicans have set a new standard for judicial nominees: it involves confirming only 11 nominees per year, routinely holding nominees over in Committee, and routine cloture votes and roll call votes on every district nominee. That is the way to ensure the President-elect's nominees are treated as ''fairly'' as President Obama's nominees.

In the President's second full month in office, Senate Republicans wrote to him, demanding that he consult with them on judicial nominations. The President did just that. His first nominee was David Hamilton of Indiana to the Seventh Circuit, a nomination made in consultation with, and with the support of the most senior Republican Senator, Richard Lugar. Senate Republicans nonetheless filibustered the nomination. These were the same Republicans who used to claim that the filibustering judicial nominations was unconstitutional.

Since then, Senate Republicans have obstructed and delayed just about every circuit nominee of this President. They filibustered Robert Bacharach's nomination to the 10th Circuit, even though he had the support of his two home State Republican Senators. That was the first time a circuit nominee had been successfully filibustered after receiving bipartisan support in Committee. That filibuster meant that his confirmation was needlessly delayed for 8 months, after which he was confirmed unanimously.

When George W. Bush was President, the average circuit nominee spent just 18 days waiting for a vote on the Senate floor. The average circuit nominee of President Obama's waited exactly 100 days longer than that. There is no good reason these nominees should have had to wait six and a half times as long for a vote.

Senate Republicans delayed confirmation of Judge Patty Shwartz of New Jersey to the Third Circuit for 13 months. They delayed confirmation of Judge Richard Taranto to the Federal circuit for a full year. They delayed confirmation of Judge Albert Diaz of North Carolina to the Fourth Circuit for 11 months. They delayed confirmation of Judge Jane Stranch of Tennessee to the Sixth Circuit and Judge William Kayatta to the First Circuit for 10 months. They delayed confirmation of Judge Ray Lohier of New York to the Second Circuit for 7 months. They delayed confirmation of Judge Scott Matheson of Utah to the Tenth Circuit, Judge Felipe Restrepo of Pennsylvania to the Third Circuit, and Judge James Wynn, Jr., of North Carolina to the Fourth Circuit for 6 months. They delayed confirmation of Judge Andre Davis of Maryland to the Fourth Circuit, Judge Henry Floyd of South Carolina to the Fourth Circuit, Judge Stephanie Thacker of West Virginia to the Fourth Circuit, and Judge

Jacqueline Nguyen of California to the Ninth Circuit for 5 months. They delayed confirmation of Judge Adalberto Jordan of Florida to the 11th Circuit, Judge Beverly Martin of Georgia to the 11th Circuit, Judge Mary Murguia of Arizona to the Ninth Circuit, Judge Bernice Donald of Tennessee to the Sixth Circuit, Judge Barbara Keenan of Virginia to the Fourth Circuit, Judge Thomas Vanaskie of Pennsylvania to the Third Circuit, Judge Joseph Greenaway of New Jersey to the Third Circuit, Judge Denny Chin of New York to the Second Circuit, Judge Chris Droney of Connecticut to the Second Circuit, Judge David Barron of Massachusetts to the First Circuit, and Judge Carolyn McHugh of Utah to the 10th Circuit for 4 months. They delayed confirmation of Judge Paul Watford of California to the Ninth Circuit, Judge Andrew Hurwitz of Arizona to the Ninth Circuit, Judge Michelle Friedland of California to the Ninth Circuit, Judge Morgan Christen of Alaska to the Ninth Circuit, Judge Nancy Moritz of Kansas to the 10th Circuit, Judge Stephen Higginson of Louisiana to the Fifth Circuit, Judge Gerard Lynch of New York to the Second Circuit, Judge Susan Carney of Connecticut to the Second Circuit, Judge Cheryl Krause of New Jersey to the Third Circuit, Judge Jill Pryor of Georgia to the 11th Circuit, and Judge Kathleen O'Malley of Ohio to the Federal circuit for 3 months. Even though they have been approved by the Republican-led Judiciary Committee, the three circuit nominees currently awaiting votes have been pending for months, too. Donald Schott of Wisconsin, nominated to the Seventh Circuit, has been waiting for 6 months. Jennifer Puhl of North Dakota, nominated to the Eighth Circuit, has been waiting for 5 months. Judge Lucy Koh, of California, nominated to the Ninth Circuit, has been waiting for 3 months.

And then there was the unprecedented blockade of the D.C. Circuit, when Senate Republicans refused to allow President Obama to fill any of three vacancies that still existed in 2013. Republicans tried to suggest that filling vacancies was ''court packing'' and tried to eliminate three seats from that court. This unfortunate tactic was pioneered by one Senator 20 years ago to prevent President Clinton from appointing an African-American judge to the Fourth Circuit, ultimately forcing President Clinton to recess appoint Judge Roger Gregory as the first African-American judge on that court. The filibuster, even as Senate Republicans abused it again and again, had traditionally been reserved for ''extraordinary circumstances'' and extending debates about the merits of individual nominees. President Obama made three excellent, highly respected nominations to the D.C. Circuit, but Senate Republicans did not focus debate on their qualifications or their records. Rather they claimed President Obama should be denied the ability to make nominations under his constitutional authority. I said at the time that some called this blockade ''nullification,'' as Republicans tried to thwart the will of the majority of Americans who elected President Obama in 2008 and again in 2012. Little did the American people know that this blockade would be a precursor to what they would do with his next Supreme Court nominee.

Republican obstruction and abuse of the filibuster also extended to district court nominees under President Obama. It is particularly troubling that many of these nominees were targeted on the basis of actions they took on behalf of clients. I remember what Chief Justice Roberts said at his confirmation hearing: ''[I]t's a tradition of the American Bar that goes back before the founding of the country that lawyers are not identified with the positions of their clients. The most famous example probably was John Adams, who represented the British soldiers charged in the Boston Massacre. He did that for a reason, because he wanted to show that the Revolution in which he was involved was not about overturning the rule of law, it was about vindicating the rule of law. ''Our Founders thought that they were not being given their rights under the British system to which they were entitled, and by representing the British soldiers, he helped show that what they were about was defending the rule of law, not undermining it, and that principle, that you don't identify the lawyer with the particular views of the client, or the views that the lawyer advances on behalf of the client, is critical to the fair administration of justice.''

To attack a judicial nominee on the basis of work they did for a client is to denigrate the rule of law and strike at the very foundations of the American legal system. It was wrong to filibuster Caitlin Halligan because special interests disliked a position she argued at the direction of New York's attorney general when she was that State's solicitor general. It was wrong to attack Edward Chen because he had worked at the ACLU and accuse him of having an ''ACLU gene.'' And it was appalling to filibuster John McConnell because of his work on litigation against tobacco companies. Nor was this limited to judicial nominations—the same shameful playbook was used against Debo Adegbile, an honorable and distinguished public servant who was nominated to serve as Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division in the Department of Justice. It should concern all of us that one of the leaders of this effort to undermine the adversarial system might be our next Attorney General.

Until Barack Obama was elected President, we had a different standard. In all but the most extreme circumstances, we deferred to home State Senators and their work with the President to find the right nominee for their state. In 8 years, I cast votes against just two of President Bush's district court nominees. Early in President Obama's first term, 37 Senate Republicans voted against two of his district court nominees in 1 day. In my 42 years in the Senate, I have opposed cloture on a single district court nominee. I did so because of his personal involvement with efforts to intimidate African-American voters.

One important Senate tradition has remained intact: the Judiciary Committee blue slip, which represents Senators' important role in providing advice and consent for the President's nominees. During the almost 20 years that I have served as chairman or ranking member of the Judiciary Committee, I have steadfastly protected the rights of the minority through both Republican and Democratic administrations-and I have done so despite criticism from Democrats. I have only proceeded with judicial nominations supported by both home State Senators. I will put my record of consistent fairness up against that of any chairman. Chairman Grassley has stated that he will continue the practice of requiring both blue slips before proceeding with a nomination, and I applaud him for that commitment. I hope he will continue to honor that commitment, despite the criticism he might receive.

The blue slip matters because it protects the Senate's constitutional role in providing advice and consent on nominations. The Judiciary Committee and the Senate are not rubberstamps; we are a check on Presidential power, and we have a meaningful role in making recommendations to the President and then evaluating nominees on their individual merits. A fair and thorough confirmation process is how we give meaning to the checks and balances in the Constitution.

Our Federal judiciary is also strengthened when it better reflects the Nation it serves. I commend President Obama for having nominated such a diverse group of qualified judges. In his first term alone, President Obama appointed as many women judges as President Bush did during his entire 8 years in office. In just those first 4 years, President Obama also nominated more African Americans, more Asian Americans, and more openly gay Americans than his predecessor did in 8 years. This progress continued in President Obama's second term, and even without additional confirmations, he has appointed nearly twice as many women judges, more than two and a half times as many African-American judges, and more than five times as many Asian American judges as President Bush. All Americans can be proud of the Senate and the President's efforts to have the Federal judiciary better reflect the public it serves.

Despite unrelenting Republican obstruction, President Obama worked hard with home State Senators to find judicial nominees who were qualified,

in the mainstream, and who helped ensure the Federal judiciary reflects all Americans. President Obama's nominees included Judge Christina Reiss, the first woman to serve on the District of Vermont; Judge Andre Davis, just the third African American to serve on the Fourth Circuit; Judge Irene Berger, the first African-American Federal judge in West Virginia; Judge Abdul Kallon, the third African-American district judge in Alabama, whose nomination to be the first African American from Alabama to serve on a Federal appeals court is being blocked by that State's Senators; Judge Jacqueline Nguyen, the first Vietnamese American to serve as a Federal district judge and now the first Asian Pacific American woman to serve as a Federal circuit judge as well; Judge Dolly Gee, the first Chinese American woman to serve as a Federal judge; Judge Rosanna Peterson, the first woman to serve on the Eastern District of Washington; Judge Nancy Freudenthal, the first female Federal judge in Wyoming; Judge Benita Pearson, the first African-American Federal judge in Ohio; Judge Kimberly Mueller, the first woman to serve on the Eastern District of California; Judge Edmond Chang, the first Asian American Federal judge in Illinois; Judge Carlton Reeves, the second African-American district judge in Mississippi; Judge William Martinez, the second Hispanic to serve on the District of Colorado; Judge J. Michelle Childs, the second African-American woman to serve on the District of South Carolina; Judge Tanya Pratt, the first African-American Federal judge in Indiana; Judge Lucy Koh, the first Korean American woman to serve as a Federal judge; Judge Gloria Navarro, then the only woman and only Hispanic on the District of Nevada; Judge Barbara Keenan, the first woman from Virginia to serve on the Fourth Circuit; Judge O. Rogeriee Thompson, the first African-American and just the second woman to serve on the First Circuit; Judge Albert Diaz, the first Latino to serve on the Fourth Circuit; Judge Mary Murguia, the first Hispanic and the second woman from Arizona to serve on the Ninth Circuit; Judge Denny Chin, who upon confirmation to the Second Circuit became the only active Asian Pacific American judge on our circuit courts; Judge Marco Hernandez, the first Latino to serve as a Federal judge in Oregon; Judge James Graves, the first African-American from Mississippi to serve on the Fifth Circuit; Judge James Shadid, the first Arab American Federal judge in Illinois; Judge Mae D'Agostino, the only woman on the Northern District of New York; Judge Jimmie Reyna, the first Latino on the Federal circuit; Judge Edward Chen, just the second Asian Pacific American to serve on the Northern District of California; Judge Arenda Wright Allen, the first African-American woman to serve as a Federal district judge in Virginia; Judge J. Paul Oetken, the first openly gay man confirmed to be a district judge; Judge Ramona Villagomez Manglona, the first indigenous person to serve as a U.S. District Court Judge in the Northern Mariana Islands; Judge Bernice Donald, the first African-American woman to serve on the Sixth Circuit; Judge Cathy Bissoon, the first woman of color to serve on the Western District of Pennsylvania; Judge Sharon Gleason, the first woman to serve on the District of Alaska; Judge Morgan Christen, the first woman from Alaska to serve on the Ninth Circuit; Judge Nannette Brown, the first African-American woman to serve as a Federal district judge in Louisiana; Judge Nancy Torresen, the first woman to serve on the District of Maine; Judge Steve Jones, who became one of only two active African-American Federal judges in Georgia; Judge Paul Watford, who is one of only two African-Americans serving on the Ninth Circuit; Judge Adalberto Jordan, the first Cuban-born judge on the 11th Circuit; Judge Stephanie Thacker, the first woman from West Virginia to serve on the Fourth Circuit; Judge Shelley Dick, the first woman to serve on the Middle District of Louisiana; Judge Landya McCafferty, the first woman to serve on the District of New Hampshire; Judge Susan Watters, the first woman to serve on the District of Montana; Judge Elizabeth Wolford, the first woman to serve on the Western District of New York; Judge Debra Brown, the first African-American woman to serve as a Federal judge in Mississippi; and Judge Diane Humetewa, the first Native American woman to serve as a Federal judge. We can all be proud that our Federal bench today better reflects the broad diversity of our Nation and represents the best of the legal profession.

However, the nominees that are being obstructed on the floor today include Armando Bonilla, who would be the first Hispanic judge to ever serve on the U.S. Court of Federal Claims; Stephanie Finley, who would be the first African-American judge to serve on the Western District of Louisiana; Lucy Koh, who would be the first Korean American woman to be a circuit court judge; and Florence Pan, who would be the first Asian American woman on the district court in DC. I am also disappointed that we have not moved forward on the nomination of African-American Judge Richard Boulware to serve on the U.S. Sentencing Commission. The Sentencing Commission currently does not have a single person of color serving as a commissioner—yet it impacts criminal justice issues that deeply affect communities of color.

In the 20 years that I have been chairman or ranking member of the Judiciary Committee, I have worked with Republicans and Democrats to ensure that our committee has provided a fair and thorough process for judicial nominees. Our power of advice and consent is a critical check on any President, and by protecting the independence of the third branch, we uphold our Constitution. The late Chief Justice Rehnquist referred to our independent judiciary as the crown jewel of our democracy, and he was absolutely right. I have worked to protect and strengthen that crown jewel during my time as chairman and ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and I will continue to do so in the years ahead.

ATTORNEYS GENERAL IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, the Northern Triangle countries of Central America—El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—face many similar challenges: poverty, gangs, violence, corruption, and organized crime. Another one of these challenges is weak judicial systems.

For as long as anyone can remember, judges in these countries, no matter how unqualified, have been selected through opaque processes which have benefited those with personal or political connections or the ability to curry favor. Attorneys general have often turned out to be corrupt and in cahoots with organized crime, or they have been harassed and threatened to the point that they have declined to pursue cases against powerful elites or have left the country out of fear for their own safety or that of their families.

But there are some signs that things are changing for the better. Today, each of these countries has an attorney general who is working to end the history of impunity that has enabled almost anyone, including members of the police and armed forces, to get away with the most heinous crimes.

In Guatemala, Attorney General Thelma Aldana Hernandez; in El Salvador, Attorney General Douglas Melendez Ruiz; and in Honduras, Attorney General Oscar Fernando Chinchilla Banegas have each shown that they take seriously their responsibility to act with professionalism and impartiality in pursuit of justice. For doing so, they have each faced attempts to thwart their efforts through intimidation and threats.

In the U.S. Congress we recognize the challenges and dangers they face, and we strongly support them. No democracy can survive without a justice system that has the confidence and respect of the people. There is nothing more fundamental to a credible justice system than an independent judiciary and professionally trained prosecutors who are trustworthy. Equal access to justice is a necessity for all people, regardless of economic status, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or political affiliation.

It is in the interest of each of these attorneys general to share best practices; to collectively reinforce the importance of investing in stronger judicial institutions; to develop a joint strategy for using their offices to help